

ACCOUNTABLE SOCIOLOGY: A CRITICAL EVALUATION

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How accountable are sociologists to themselves and to their discipline? What assurance do we have that our work will contribute to the advancement of sociology as a viable social science? It is not a simple matter. When Gouldner speaks of *domain assumptions* he is reminding all that we came from somewhere before entering the field of sociology, that we harbor inherent biases which spell out for us that the "value-free" attributes of sociology are a sham. There is no magic formula designed to compensate this process.

Accountability is one approach with vital ethical overtones because to be accountable is to be worthy of participation. Accountability suggests a normative system of ethical guidelines. Thus, training is one thing; dedication is another. The two entities are not necessarily correlates. Consequently, sociology and doing sociological research requires a special commitment to oneself and and the discipline. One anticipates a model of ethical behavior which is further complicated by the diffusion of personnel in the discipline, subdivided into three general categories:

1) ministers and ministers' sons concerned with reform; 2) neopositivists concerned largely with measurement; and 3) "radicals" concerned mainly with social change and Marxism.

The heterogeneity of sociologists and their training represents a problem of adaptation to ethics in research. Someone trained at the University of Michigan or Chicago certainly has a different orientation than someone trained at Emory or Harvard University. Some sociologists see little value in participation in field studies. They may even attempt synthesis of research in which they have little direct exposure.

We can begin to identify a dichotomy based on both *inner dedication* and *other dedication*. Such conditions as *anonymity* and *confidentiality* may be related to the *inner commitment*. The *other commitment* is something else. Whereas Horowitz could praise the work of Humphreys which cast light on a dark area of homosexual practices, he had only contempt

for the six million dollar slush fund assigned to *Project Camelot* as military intrigue which he saw as largely a Pentagon propaganda effort wherein the sociologist became nothing more than a pawn of contrived, foreign, anti-revolutionary activities.

Thus, the first principles inherent in the ethics of sociological research are based on selection of topic and anticipation of autonomy. Without those criteria, I believe that there can be no accountable sociological research in our time. If these two conditions are not met, the following conditions centering around *accountability*, *anonymity*, and *confidentiality* are meaningless. The golden rule of "doing unto others as you would have them do unto you" may indicate a positive attitude towards respondents, but it would not be unwarranted to rough up the respondents somewhat if the value of the data was considered necessary and paramount. As a last resort, respondents can be paid for their time. Psychologists have been probing for many years with their *Intelligence Quotient* and other tests as well as electrical shock apparatus. Anthropologists are not beloved persons among the tribal American Indians or among the tribal peoples along the coast of western Africa. The economist is not gaining any great following with dismal forecasts for the future, nor is the political scientist who speaks of our outmoded political institutions. Such social scientists are dedicated and ethical. They are also practicing accountability as they know and understand it. Finally, the historian is famous for warning us how ignorant we are in not awakening to the lessons of history. The geographer warns us to expect a major flood on the Mississippi River about once per century.

The position of the sociologist's respondent may be complicated by the fact that the public is less familiar with sociologists than with other academic disciplines. The sociologist who is not willing to settle for a captive audience of his/her own students has a more difficult time of persuading respondents than field workers in other disciplines. The critical problem regarding the respondent, the source of primary data, is that such individual is under no

compulsion to submit to an interview or to complete a questionnaire. All such activity is voluntary. In some cases, respondents may wish to know if they will be allowed to see the completed survey. To some extent, ethnic expertise, folklore awareness and common sense can pay great dividends for the sociologist. Black sociologists interviewing black respondents, and women sociologists interviewing female respondents may avoid much friction and may be most productive of results. Some would argue along this line that the former delinquent should interview the delinquent respondent. There are many opportunities here for experimentation.

Should the sociologist attempt to be free of working in behalf of corrupt dictators of "banana republics" or forces of totalitarianism in the society? Is it essential to adhere to an ethical code? For any study desired by a foundation or government agency the sociologist should always ask: "Is the study relevant?" The lure of grant money should not be the all-important consideration nor even enter into the decision unless conditions for sociological accountability can be satisfied.

Similarly, the sociologist should not be entirely dependent on the computer or other mechanical aids, like recorders. Alternate modes of collecting data may prove more ethical than surveys which require large funding outlays. The sociologist should become familiar with life history and case study techniques and with all forms of observation methods. One person working persistently alone can unravel much social phenomena which research teams could not resolve. Saving time punching computer data cards may be the critical illusion of the present century. Coding is no substitute for intuition. Veblen or Marx or Weber would have been uncomfortable with the computer. Durkheim was satisfied with secondary or institutional data sources in his well-known and highly influential study of suicide.

To follow these guidelines would delete little of genuine interest to the accountable sociologist. The important consideration

should be to rule out propaganda as research, and ideology as science. The research sociologist is not always in control of the situation. When in doubt, refuse the assignment, no matter what the National Science Foundation or other agency may say. In a secondary way, sociologists should busy themselves in a re-examination of their classical studies to detect both propagandist and ideological content. Examples include Stouffer's *American Soldier*. A genuine beginning has been made in this direction by Madge in *The Origins of Scientific Sociology*. We need a follow-up to this important critical work of British sociological scholarship.

This analysis is not intended to discourage the sociologist from becoming involved in controversial or political issues. This is emphatically not the case. What should be of importance is that the sociologist must feel free to make important decisions regarding his/her research. Only in this way can the sociologist give candid and objective study to such topics as *hippies, communes, socialism, and alternative live styles*. Only in this way can the sociologist make an important contribution to sociological research and continue collectively to build sociology as a viable social science. Only in this way can the sociologist embrace accountability.

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